

TWO ESSAYS

EVERY WORD IS AN ADVERB

DEATH TEXT AND THE HAUTE COUTURE DEATH TEXT IMAGES

Jim Leftwich

EVERY WORD IS AN ADVERB

1.

"I've never heard metrics in terms of feet. You know, on and off, weak and strong, in regulated patterns. I think of a whole phrase, no matter how long. And I think of what they call 'tala' in Indian classical music, which may be a sequence of as many as eighteen variously accented beats, which gets repeated as a unit to improvise on." — Clark Coolidge

Poetry is parsed through sound to construct as a provisional reading pulsing aggregates of unstable semantic units. Attention contracts and expands. The word itself is an unstable aggregate. Contraction sifts through syllables to letters; expansion gathers towards phrases and sentences. Content is glimpsed as a drift through ambient noise. Both the quality and the quantity of this noise vary according to each reader's capacity for entering it as an archaeologist of the asemic. Content is constructed experientially through endurance of and perseverance in the flux of a polysemic during. Polysemy is an occupational hazard for workers within the poem, no matter whether they enter as writers or readers. In reading, as in writing, the excessive production of meaning is encountered as a fundamental law. The amorphous chaos of infinite misreadings is contained only by an application of consensus constraints. The asemic appears as an aporia of excessive production during the collaborative process of meaning-building. Language itself exists as an alchemical athanor generating transformative meanings as an antithesis of sense.

2.

"A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive; there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages." — Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari

If there are no nouns in nature, as Fenollosa claimed, then there is no such thing as repetition in human experience, there is only consciousness during an arbitrarily segmented process, and the idea of rhythm itself is subject to a multiplicity of hermeneutic improvisations. This is not to say

that subjectivity is of necessity ludic, but only to suggest a playful absurdity in the human desire for certainty. Consciousness is nomadic. Thought drifts. Cognition leaps and burrows. The self exists to multiply its selves and seek patterns in their dispersal. Consciousness is non-local and atemporal, and is a causal agent, actively inventing an ecology of realities as its habitat. Experiential subjectivity acts as a laboratory in which these ecologies experiment with the myriad processes of being. The declarative sentence is but one among many tools. Aphoristic actualities occur to question our commitment to attention. The noun in language, then, would function as an adverb in nature, if we were to attend for a moment to the facticity of language as a causal agent.

3.

"The most pronounced feature of organic evolution is not the creation of a multiplicity of amazing morphological structures, but the general expansion of 'semiotic freedom', that is to say the increase in richness or 'depth' of meaning that can be communicated." — Jesper Hoffmeyer

A poem grows like a genetically-modified weed infesting an urban garden, an organic process mediated by its cultural context. We embrace the lie as the natural habitat of language, its homeland and its faith, and we move forward towards familiar patterns, to comfort us as we sleep. At the end of the day, going forward, we empty ourselves of all but the flimsiest of sanctioned clichés. To read poetry is to refuse to go shopping, at least for an hour or two. To write poetry is to deny the inalienable rights of humankind, at least as they apply to one's personal pursuits, is to choose instead an indeterminate epistemology against all histories of metaphysics. Poetry may well be the end of capitalism as we know it; the workers own the means of production, and no one is buying a word of it. This is what we mean when we speak of the neocontemporary. Repeat after me: neocontemporary. Say it like you mean it.

4.

"I think people have an innate ability to put things together in semiotic relationships — to make signs. To make sense out of something is to read it, in a broad sense. And vice versa." — Stuart Pid

Truth in poetry is a provisional metafiction, a series of advertisements for the lack of a single product. Context is a quincunx. Sense is an elliptical

orbit. Sound has many disguises and is everywhere you are not. The readers sit like sentries, perched and alert, listening to the dead center in the heartless heat of the night. The quadrature of the circle is not a random walk.

We made videos of the coup and hid them in plain view, encrypted interrogations of the surfaces of the text. Words sleep with one eye open. Their sleeping bags and burlap sacks bulge with sacred burps. Their writers do what must be done, then keep a careful distance, lonely semes orbiting a broken sun.

Remember the golden rule: those who have the gold, make the rules. That would be the first rule, clearly made by an existential trickster with nothing but contempt for gold and those who possess it. Some of us don't have a prayer when it comes to learning how to obey the rules. Those who make the rules should give up now.

burp't
andrew topel & jim leftwich

burp't riddle did roller derby kids slurp
puddle slimy slant gipper can't paddle

double seam measled twister peely rubble
boots hem hammer stubble gimmick roots

autobot seasaw was'see agitprop pasty acrobat
tobogan weasel soppy bone wagon plop botoxin

grow't hoarse wiggle flag pig vote
worse groat tagged fig wag horse

seaweed tarragon gone'again hop nerdy seabed
weaseed autobahn naggin'got nasty pants sememe

deem boost subtle hammock whisper bream
'em soluble blister realty butter stem

middle puzzle zipper plant maggot'rock fiddle
dimly burnt rubberbundled squid bacon flimsy

5.

"i like no absolutes but the present open wide. writing 'readyness' — universal writing. writing emotions. writing 'love' & not its cause & effect history." — John Crouse

Yesterday I read a manifesto of sorts by Miklós Erdély. Roughly, it's about the ways in which polysemy leads to a cancellation of meaning. This suggests a route from the polysemic to the asemic, or at least that was my perspective in reading it. From Theses for the Marly Conference of 1980, in Primary Documents:

"While in the case of conventional signs meaning narrows down with an increase in significata, in the case of iconic, indexical signs polysemy leads to attenuation and devaluation of meaning, and ultimately, as in the case of the work of art, to the loss of all meaning.

Therefore a work of art may be considered to be a sign that amplifies and multiplies the various meanings at the expense of each, and causes them to extinguish each other, thus making it impossible for the work of art as a whole to have any meaning." — Miklós Erdély

I searched the web for more Erdély texts and came across an interview with Janos Sugar, who studied and worked with Erdély. The Sugar interview both expands and compresses Erdély's thesis, at least as I read it. We arrive at the question of subjectivity, which is a kind of logical cul de sac for both polysemy and asemia, but the site as it were of subjectivity takes on a sort of nomadic playfulness against the contextual political constraints. In their function as limits these political contingencies enable a paradoxically radicalized freedom. The end of history can only occur as an edict from the king, but we're old enough as a species and as a culture to know not to believe a word of it. The king is a liar by definition; that's how he got his job. All authority is based on theft, which is to say it's based on lies. But it isn't pragmatically accurate to think of theft as a lie about the concept of property. Theft is a lie about the concept of possessive pronouns, and it is usually told by someone who genuinely believes the lie. This is why we shouldn't speak of the end of history, but rather of the end of authority. The end of history is a mask for the end of the authority of language. Our task is to write the facticity of that demise. The self-leveling plumb level vs. the levellers animated semiotic wrestling, a random walk

through the presents of a history, a poetics of cognitive endurance — our acts enact (provisionally), being here (in the ballpark) now (contingent), so as to resist the narcotic allure of having been there, doing this, and also rewriting readymades, particularity, universality emergent in the fact that any particularity will suffice as an efficient tool for the work at hand, no longer believing what is written, only attending to the during of thinking within and against it, throwing it away like trash, like casting dice or bones, or into the boiling succotash of textual emergence, where everything fits, and nothing is dominant.

6.

“Composition by Unit: read it that way.” — Clark Coolidge

May 2005

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DEATH TEXT AND THE HAUTE COUTURE DEATH TEXT IMAGES
for ross priddle

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Arundhati Roy: “Before September 11th 2001 America had a secret history. Secret especially from its own people. But now America's secrets are history, and its history is public knowledge. It's street talk.”

Naomi Wolf: “Peace and trust between men and women who are lovers would be as bad for the consumer economy and the power structure as peace on earth for the military-industrial complex.”

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the images are stolen. stolen twice. if i wanted them in a context of

pornography or sexist fashion i would not need to steal them from their thieves. but i want the context and the content of a radically inclusive democracy. in a context of chrysocratic terror deterioration appears as progress and decay seems like a necessary evolutionary process. i work to decompose the commodified images and erase their encrypted marketing strategies.

we are being sold a war against ourselves. a cosmetic economy masks the horror and lures us to complicity.

the texts layered over the images are also stolen. stolen and translated, deliberately mistranslated, recensions redacted improvisationally to render texts as dissonant music in disjunctive fragments. each textual fragment is a discourse against war presented as language at war against itself. normative language usage would sell us to ourselves as proponents of the ideology of war, individual expressions of that universal agenda, sexist, racist and classist, subservient to the pragmatism of power. i would steal the discourse itself and rewrite it against its imposed, invasive intentions. i would invite the reader to continue a similar process.

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i learned about sexuality and feminism simultaneously. i've always thought a healthy eroticism was one of the fundamental goals of the feminist movement. the issue has never been sexuality itself, but rather the gender-based subjugation and degradation resulting from a dominant sexist ideology. my first girlfriend was a feminist. i spent six years with her. i'm not sure it has ever occurred to me that being anything other than a feminist was a serious option. when i was introduced to the idea in the early 70s, it seemed like a necessary part of the larger cultural transformation, a transformation of consciousness, as necessary as opposition to the vietnam war and to violent conflict-resolution, or support for the civil rights movement and opposition to racism in all of its forms. feminism was but one aspect of a multifaceted cultural revolution which included environmental awareness and the privileging of cooperation over competition, an interrogation of capitalist and corporate ideology, spiritual awakening and personal transformation, development of one's creative potential in artistic activity and as a way of thinking about and during one's daily life. the women's liberation movement seemed absolutely necessary for the vitality and viability of the whole spectrum of so-called countercultural concerns and values. times have changed, to understate

the obvious, but i still think very much in terms of a diverse coalition of intertwined and overlapping groups working to alter the fundamental institutions and beliefs of american, and increasingly global, culture. sexism, racism, classism, and militarism are components of a larger ideology, or expressions of that ideology, and i take as a given my responsibility to respond from an oppositional stand point.

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i call these images collectively the haute couture death text series. the death text itself is a long anti-war poem in prose. while i was writing it, in the months leading up to the invasion of iraq, i came across a stack of elle magazines in a box beside a dumpster. i brought the box home and put it under my desk, where it remained for several months. after i finished writing the text i decided to scan the images from the fashion advertisements in the magazines. then i layered the text over the scans. i liked the results, so i started gathering images of models and actresses to extend the series.

the images are appropriated and detourned, recontextualized and used for purposes counter to those intended by their original publishers. i seriously doubt it would have occurred to me to layer these images with anti-war texts if i hadn't been thinking in terms of a feminist critique of war, and of something very much like a countercultural critique of a dominant culture in which both sexism and militarism flourish.

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Marguerite Duras: "It is an extraordinary thing, but men still see themselves as supreme authorities on women's liberation. They say: 'In my opinion, women should do this or that to liberate themselves—' And when people laugh they don't understand why. Then they take up the old refrain — their veneration of women. Whatever form this veneration takes, be it religious or surrealist, and even Georges Bataille is guilty of it, it is still racism. But when you point this out to men, they don't understand."

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Hélène Cixous: "What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble? If it were to come out in a

new day that the logocentric project had always been, undeniably, to found (fund) phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself? Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies: another thinking as yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of all society. Well, we are living through this very period when the conceptual foundation of a millennial culture is in the process of being undermined by millions of a species of mole as yet not recognized." (1975)

Zillah Eisenstein: "The 'war of/on terror' is a terrorizing war for all who come in contact with it. The lines between combatant and civilian, rights and degradation, and white, black and brown men and women are realigned and remade. But this gender flux takes place within the structural constraints of racialized patriarchy, and masculinized gender. The naked bodies of tortured Muslim men alongside white women with cigarettes and leashes, and the absence and silencing of Muslim women at Abu Ghraib is a heart-rending reminder that war is obscene. It would be a double heart-break to think that people in this country abide any part of the violations at Abu Ghraib, especially in the name of feminism. I am hoping that the horrific pictorial exposure of torture at Abu Ghraib will recommit us all to struggle on behalf of an anti-racist feminist humanity inclusive of each and every one's liberation across the globe."

bell hooks: "Women of color, from various ethnic backgrounds, as well as women who were active in the gay movement, not only experienced the development of solidarity between women and men in resistance struggle, but recognized its value. They were not willing to devalue this bonding by allying themselves with anti-male bourgeois white women. Encouraging political bonding between women and men to radically resist sexist oppression would have called attention to the transformative potential of feminism. The anti-male stance was a reactionary perspective that made feminism appear to be a movement that would enable white women to usurp white male power, replacing white male supremacist rule with white female supremacist rule."

Jane Tompkins: "It is a tenet of feminist rhetoric that the personal is the political, but who in the academy acts on this where language is concerned? We all speak the father tongue, which is impersonal, while decrying the father's ideas."

Annie Leclerc: "There is only one just form of thought, the living thought that can revive the smothered fire of life and sow revolt against the poisoners, the pillagers, the profaners of life. To revolt: that's the right word. Yet it's still not quite strong enough. Let the bell toll the end not only of those eminent possessors but also of their carrion-eating values that have polluted the whole world."

Adrienne Rich: "The word power is highly charged for women. It has been long associated with the use of force, with rape, with the stockpiling of weapons, with the ruthless accrual of wealth and the hoarding of resources, with the power that acts only in its own interests, despising and exploiting the powerless — including women and children. The effects of this kind of power are all around us, even literally in the water we drink and the air we breathe, in the form of carcinogens and radioactive wastes. But for a long time now, feminists have been talking about redefining power, about that meaning of power which returns to the root... to be able, to have the potential, to possess and use one's energy of creation — transforming power."

Naomi Wolf: "Male-dominated institutions — particularly corporate interests — recognize the dangers posed to them by love's escape. Women who love themselves are threatening; but men who love real women, more so."

Dominique Poggi: "The sexual liberation preached by pornography is actually a channeling of sexuality toward a heterosexual world in which men are still the sole masters of the game; in this way, pornography militates in favor of maintaining men's appropriation of women."

bell hooks: "Had feminist activists called attention to the relationship between ruling class men and the vast majority of men, who are socialized to perpetuate and maintain sexism and sexist oppression even as they reap no life-affirming benefits, these men might have been motivated to examine the impact of sexism in their lives."

Rachel Blau DuPlessis: "Howe appears to be on the cusp between two feminisms: the one analyzing female difference, the other 'feminine' difference. For the latter, she is close to Julia Kristeva, who evokes marginality, subversion, dissidence as anti-patriarchal motives beyond all limits. Anything marginalized by patriarchal order is, thus, 'feminine;' the 'feminine' position (which can be held by persons of both genders) is a

privileged place from which to launch an anti-authoritarian struggle. The female use of this 'feminine' of marginality and the avant-garde use of this 'feminine' of marginality are mutually reinforcing in the work of some contemporary women: Lyn Hejinian, Kathleen Fraser, Gail Sher, Beverly Dahlen and Howe. This mixed allegiance will naturally call into question varieties of flat-footed feminism."

Christine Delphy: "In the same way that feminism-as-a-movement aims at the revolution of social reality, so feminism-as-a-theory (and each is indispensable to the other) must aim at the revolution of knowledge."

Naomi Wolf: "Women who have broken out of gender roles have proved manageable: Those few with power are being retrained as men. But with the apparition of numbers of men moving into passionate, sexual love of real women, serious money and authority could defect to join forces with the opposition. Such love would be a political upheaval more radical than the Russian Revolution and more destabilizing to the balance of world power than the end of the nuclear age. It would be the downfall of civilization as we know it — that is, of male dominance; and for heterosexual love, the beginning of the beginning."

Zillah Eisenstein: "Masculinist depravity, as a political discourse, can be adopted by males and/or females. It is all the more despicable that the Bush administration used the language of women's rights to justify the bombs in the Afghan war against Taliban practices towards women; and then again against the horrific torture and rape chambers under Saddam Hussein. And it should be no surprise that Bush's women — Laura, Mary Matalin, and Karen Hughes — who regularly bad-mouth feminism of any sort were responsible for articulating this imperial women's rights justification for war."

Starhawk: "Wise feminists do not claim that women are innately kinder, gentler, more compassionate than men per se. If we did, the Margaret Thatchers and Condoleeza Rices of the world would soon prove us wrong. We do claim that patriarchy encourages and rewards behavior that is brutal and stupid. We need raucous, incautious feminist voices to puncture the pomposity, the arrogance, the hypocrisy of the war mongers, to point out that gorilla chest-beating does not constitute diplomacy, that having the world's largest collection of phallic projectile weapons does not constitute moral authority, that invasion and penetration are not acts of liberation."

Arundhati Roy: "Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness — and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe."

Naomi Wolf: "Ads do not sell sex — that would be counterproductive, if it meant that heterosexual women and men turned to one another and were gratified. What they sell is sexual discontent."

Judy Rebick: "In Beijing, feminist leaders from around the world warned that there were two paths emerging for humanity — corporate globalization and fundamentalism. They argued that both were devastating for women. Feminist leaders from around the world were calling for a third path, based on equality, democracy and respect for diversity."

Judy Rebick: "In the Americas, where women's rights have made tremendous gains over the past decades, a ferocious backlash against feminism has accompanied the rise of neoliberalism. As feminists have always argued for stronger social programmes, marginalizing and blaming feminism is an important ideological adjunct to neo-liberalism."

Eric Foner: "Of the many lessons of American history, this is among the most basic. Our civil rights and civil liberties — freedom of expression, the right to criticize the government, equality before the law, restraints on the exercise of police powers — are not gifts from the state that can be rescinded when it desires. They are the inheritance of a long history of struggles: by abolitionists for the ability to hold meetings and publish their views in the face of mob violence; by labor leaders for the power to organize unions, picket and distribute literature without fear of arrest; by feminists for the right to disseminate birth-control information without being charged with violating the obscenity laws; and by all those who braved jail and worse to challenge entrenched systems of racial inequality."

Christine Delphy: "The rebirth of feminism coincided with the use of the term 'oppression'. The ruling ideology, i.e., common sense, daily speech, does not speak about oppression but about a 'feminine condition'. It refers back to a naturalistic explanation: to a constraint of nature, exterior reality out of reach and not modifiable by human action. The term 'oppression',

on the contrary, refers back to a choice, an explanation, a situation that is political. 'Oppression' and 'social oppression' are therefore synonyms or rather social oppression is a redundancy: the notion of a political origin, i.e., social, is an integral part of the concept of oppression. This term is thus the basis, the point of departure for any feminist study or strategy."

Julia Kristeva: "What is politically 'new' today can be seen and felt in modern music, cartoons, communes of young people provided they do not isolate themselves on the fringes of society but participate in the contradiction inherent in political classes. The women's movement, if it has a *raison d'être*, seems to be part of this trend; it is, perhaps, one of its most radical components." (1974)

Simone de Beauvoir: "Feminist thought is not monolithic; every woman who struggles has her own reasons, her own perspective, her particular experience, and she offers them to us in her own way."

Ken Kesey: "You think of the stuff that came out of the Sixties: the environmental movement, the feminist movement, the power of the civil rights movement; but most of all, it's the psychedelic movement that attempted to actually go in and change the consciousness of the people, either back to something more pure and honest, or forward to something never before realized, knowing that the places we were in, the status quo, was a dead-end — a dead-end spiritually and, as we are finding out, a dead-end economically."

Naomi Wolf: "The current allocation of power is sustained by a flood of hostile and violent sexual images, but threatened by imagery of mutual eroticism or female desire; the elite of the power structure seem to know this consciously enough to act on it."

Barbara Ehrenreich & Deirdre English: "In our concern to understand more about our own biology, for our own purposes, we must never lose sight of the fact that it is not our biology that oppresses us — but a social system based on sex and class domination. This, to us, is the most profoundly liberating feminist insight — the understanding that our oppression is socially, and not biologically, ordained. To act on this understanding is to ask for more than 'control over our own bodies'. It is to ask for, and struggle for, control over the social options available to us, and control over all the institutions of society that now define those options."

bell hooks: "Feminism defined as a movement to end sexist oppression enables women and men, girls and boys, to participate equally in revolutionary struggle."

Arundhati Roy: "It's absurd for the U.S. government to even toy with the notion that it can stamp out terrorism with more violence and oppression. Terrorism is the symptom, not the disease."

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